



Strategy for the PhD programme at LIFE 2011

report from LIFE's PhD Task Force

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Strategy for the PhD programme at LIFE 2011

Report from LIFE's PhD Task Force

Task Force members:

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Mette Skau Mikkelsen, Kell Mortensen, Lars Holm Rasmussen

Introduction

This strategy is the result of the development process for the PhD area at the Faculty of Life Sciences (LIFE), University of Copenhagen, conducted by the 'PhD Task Force' between October 2010 and May 2011. The strategy process was initiated by the Board of Management at LIFE in August 2010 as a result of the significant expansion of the PhD area seen during the past few years. With its approximately 700 PhD students enrolled, the area now accounts for more than 15% of LIFE's revenue or around DKK 200 million per year.

Historically, LIFE has hosted an internationally recognised and well-organised PhD programme within life sciences. These factors are probably the most important reasons why the area has been sufficiently robust to manoeuvre relatively smoothly through the last few years of transition and expansion. It is, however, also clear that the transition at the same time opens up for new possibilities and necessitates new ways of organising the area.

The starting point for the Task Force has been a process of collecting information and having discussions with representatives from all the central stakeholders within the PhD area. This process has opened our eyes to some of the long-term perspectives in the PhD area. It is our hope that this report and its proposed strategy and specific recommendations will constitute a useful basis for the coming years of development within the PhD area at LIFE. The present text is the short version of this proposed strategy - the full version of the report is available from www.life.ku.dk/phdintr.

August 2011
The PhD Task Force

Strategy for the PhD programme at LIFE

The strategy for the PhD programme¹ at LIFE comprises three elements: 1) Our mission and vision statements 2) the description of our strategic focus areas and 3) the expression of our value principles.

The first element is constituted by two brief statements: Our mission statement summarises what we consider the reason for the existence of the PhD programme at LIFE, while our vision statement briefly states what we want the PhD programme at LIFE to be.

The second element of our PhD strategy is the description of our strategic focus areas. Here we specify the themes which we will give particular attention over the next 3-5 years and identify courses of action that will be vital in relation to those themes.

The third element is our value principles which state our basic convictions about the PhD programme at LIFE. These principles do not provide suggestions for particular courses of action; rather they express fundamental convictions that should be kept in mind as we respond to future challenges and work towards realising our vision for the PhD programme at LIFE.

Collectively, these three elements of the PhD strategy sum up 1) why we are here and where we want to go; 2) what we will need to focus on to get there; and 3) what we should keep in mind while we are on the way.

I Mission and vision for the PhD programme at LIFE

Mission for the PhD programme at LIFE:

The PhD programme at LIFE organises training and education of researchers within all areas of life science. We do this to ensure the highest scientific level among the next generations of researchers and decision-makers to the benefit of society.

Vision for the PhD programme at LIFE:

The PhD programme is a dynamic and inspiring environment for educating researchers at the highest international level.

¹ The PhD programme is defined in a broad sense that includes all persons and activities that relate to PhD education at LIFE.

II Strategic focus areas of the PhD programme at LIFE

Benefit for society

The PhD programme is one of the flagships at LIFE, and this faculty will continue to allocate significant resources to the training and education of PhD students within life sciences. The overall aim of the programme continues to be to train researchers who will contribute to the further development of the general welfare and knowledge level in our society – both in the public and the private sectors.

Benefit for research and teaching

The PhD programme will constitute an integrated part of the research environment at LIFE and secure future lecturers for top-quality research-based BSc and MSc programmes. To ensure this, the elite research areas as well as LIFE's core research and teaching areas should be supported by targeted recruitment of PhD students using strategic financial allocation of PhD stipends.

Stronger research environments and scientific networks

The PhD programme will constitute a central part of strong research environments at LIFE and facilitate research activities within both basic and applied sciences. The programme should be organised so as to allow PhD students to participate actively and independently in pushing the scientific frontiers and, as part of this process, to build a national and international scientific network relevant to their future careers.

Shifts in environment during the PhD programme are required by the Danish PhD Order. This – combined with the fact that a change of environment is strongly beneficial to PhD students – implies that LIFE must actively encourage such shifts.

Role of the departments to remain central for the PhD programme

The departments continue to bear the main academic, financial and social responsibility for the PhD students. The main responsibility of the PhD school and Faculty Services is to support, control and facilitate PhD training and education at the departmental level.

Social wellbeing is essential

Social wellbeing is necessary for the successful completion of a PhD programme, and integrating PhD students socially into the departments is vital for ensuring their wellbeing. In accordance with the LIFE strategy paper (Strategisk Handlingsplan 2011-14), the PhD programme at LIFE continues to encourage and, where possible, support PhD students' successful integration into and involvement in the activities of the departments.

Our PhD brand and focus on post-PhD career options

LIFE is dedicated to making a PhD degree from our faculty a brand that guarantees a) a high level of academic knowledge; b) innovative thinking; c) a strong ability for problem solving and decision making; as well as d) a sound understanding of the principle of good scientific practice.

We will continuously maintain and cultivate close collaboration between LIFE and future employers for our PhD graduates as well as monitor whether PhD graduates from LIFE, University of Copenhagen, continue to be strong and attractive job candidates.

As an integrated part of their education, the PhD students should acquire a thorough understanding of their career options and personal potential. The aim is to ensure that the PhD programme has the highest possible impact on the future careers of the PhD students and thereby on their ability to contribute to society.

Increased internationalisation

In order to obtain the highest possible academic level, we consider it paramount that the PhD programme has a strong international outlook, and we will continuously measure ourselves against and collaborate with the best PhD programmes internationally. The internationalisation, which should be beneficial to the PhD students as well as their supervisors, will be strengthened primarily by three elements: A continued focus on the recruitment and education of international PhD students; a much stronger focus on international collaborations related to PhD courses via the proposed Master Class programme; a stronger focus on establishing and nurturing international research collaborations by ensuring that as many PhD students as possible carry out a significant part of their project abroad.

As an additional element of the internationalisation effort, the PhD area at LIFE will continue its dedication to capacity building in relation to education and research in developing countries. Capacity building will take place at individual as well as institutional level.

Academic organisation and facilitation of PhD courses at the highest level

The PhD courses constitute a significant part of the PhD programme. In close collaboration with other faculties at the University of Copenhagen, other Danish universities as well as regional universities, we will ensure that our PhD students have access to a broad portfolio of relevant PhD courses at the highest international level. This includes general skills courses as well as high-level Master Class courses taught by leading international scientists.

PhD administration from a user point of view

At LIFE, we will focus on simplifying the PhD administration as seen from the users' point of view. The PhD supervisors and PhD students should experience swift, smooth and timely administration. A clear delegation of tasks and responsibilities between the departments and the central PhD administration at LIFE should be ensured with the aim of avoiding excessive administration.

Transparency in financial matters

A continued effort to secure transparency and flexibility in relation to financial matters is central to the development of the PhD area at LIFE. Our allocation of stipends will take into consideration the support of elite students, elite research areas as well as other strategically important areas.

III Value principles for the PhD programme at LIFE

Our value principles state core values for the PhD programme at LIFE and they are meant to guide future decisions relating to the PhD programme. Central to these principles is the fundamental acknowledgment that every PhD student is unique and should be given the best possible conditions for carrying out a PhD project of the highest scientific quality and for receiving an excellent PhD education.

At LIFE, we believe that the PhD students and their supervisors are the experts of the individual PhD projects and that they are the persons with the greatest academic and personal interests in making their PhD project a successful one.

Education of researchers has top priority

The central aim of the PhD school at LIFE is to facilitate the education of individual and unique researchers. The production of high-quality research will normally go hand in hand with this central aim, but remains a secondary priority.

PhD projects at the core

The individual PhD research projects are at the core of the PhD programme. Optimal facilitation of PhD research projects therefore remains a key priority in all decisions for the PhD school at LIFE.

PhD students will be given freedom and responsibility

PhD students should have the highest degree of academic freedom to pursue their individual scientific goals. This will take place within the framework of their project and under the guidance of their supervisors. However, the key responsibility for a successful PhD programme lies with the PhD student.

Excellent PhD supervision is central

Excellent PhD supervision is a requirement for an excellent PhD education.

PhD courses will be at the highest level

PhD courses are an important part of the PhD programme at LIFE. The PhD school will continuously ensure that all enrolled PhD students have access to a broad range of relevant PhD courses at the highest international level

Doing a PhD must be an education as well as a career start

The PhD programme at LIFE will not only constitute a high-level education but also the outset of a career.

Administrative routines and changes should benefit the PhD students and supervisors

The organisation of the PhD school continues to be dynamic and open to modifications of its rules, regulations and organisation provided that these are improvements as seen from the point of view of the PhD students and their supervisors.

About the strategy process, the PhD Task Force and background information

In September 2010, the terms of reference for the strategy process² were approved by the Faculty Management at LIFE, and the six-member PhD Task Force headed by the associate dean for research was appointed shortly thereafter. The Task Force was given the task of producing a written strategy for the PhD area at LIFE.

Meetings with representatives

The backbone of the strategy process has been eight meetings evenly distributed throughout the process, during which we received contributions from twenty representatives from the PhD area. We have received input from PhD students, PhD supervisors, PhD programme leaders, heads of department and administrators working with the PhD area at LIFE. Furthermore, we have acquired input from representatives from the Confederation of Danish Industry (DI) and the Danish Agriculture & Food Council (L&F), and we drew a lot of useful inspiration from the heads of the PhD schools at our sister faculties at the University of Copenhagen, the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, and from the newly established PhD school at Foulum at Aarhus University.

Written sources of background information

Among the written sources of background information, we would like to emphasise the 2011-2014 strategy for the PhD area, which constitutes a part of the large LIFE 2011-2014 strategy document³, The Academic Rules⁴ as well as the financial guidelines for the PhD programme at LIFE⁵ and the laws and regulations governing the area. Additionally, during the discussions in the final phase of the Task Force's work, the recent report from Rigsrevisionen (a public institution responsible for auditing the state accounts) has served as inspiration.

Broader discussions

The active strategy process has catalysed a series of more general, but not less constructive, discussions about the PhD area. These discussions have taken place both within the PhD board, during a number of meetings between the head of the PhD school and the individual LIFE departments and at a meeting about LIFE's PhD administration.

Afterthought

As an indirect result of the Task Force process, a number of inefficient ways of organising the area on the administrative side have been identified. Some of these have substantial practical implications for the handling of the nearly 700 enrolled PhD students' projects (expected to rise to around 900 within 3 years). Solutions to these problems should not await the publication of a PhD strategy report.

In the years to come, we expect that the PhD area will continue to be highly dynamic as a response to internal and external factors. Because of this, it is important that we maintain an ongoing evaluation and discussion to detect and correct system errors that inevitably continue to show up in a rapidly changing environment.

² Terms of reference for the Task Force process.

³ LIFE strategy paper, Strategisk handlingsplan for LIFE 2011-2014.

⁴ www.life.ku.dk/phdintr

⁵ www.life.ku.dk/phdintr



Task Force

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